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CONTAINMENT IN KOREA

Causes of the war

From 1910 to 1945 Korea was part of Japan. When the Allies defeated Japan in 1945, US and Soviet forces occupied Korea. Soviet troops occupied the area north of the 38th Parallel, or line of latitude. US troops occupied the area south of it.

The Allies' intention was to make Korea an independent country, but they could not agree on a form of government for it. The United Nations tried to settle the matter by holding elections for a new government in 1948. But communists in the North refused to accept the election result, which brought to power a Nationalist government led by Syngman Ree. They set up their own communist government in the North, led by Kim Il-Sung. The USA and Soviet Union withdrew their troops from Korea, leaving it divided between the two.

The new governments quickly started to quarrel. Both claimed authority over the whole country, and both backed their claims with force. Thousands of soldiers died in border clashes between them. Then, on 25 June 1950, North Korean forces crossed the border in a full-scale invasion of the South.

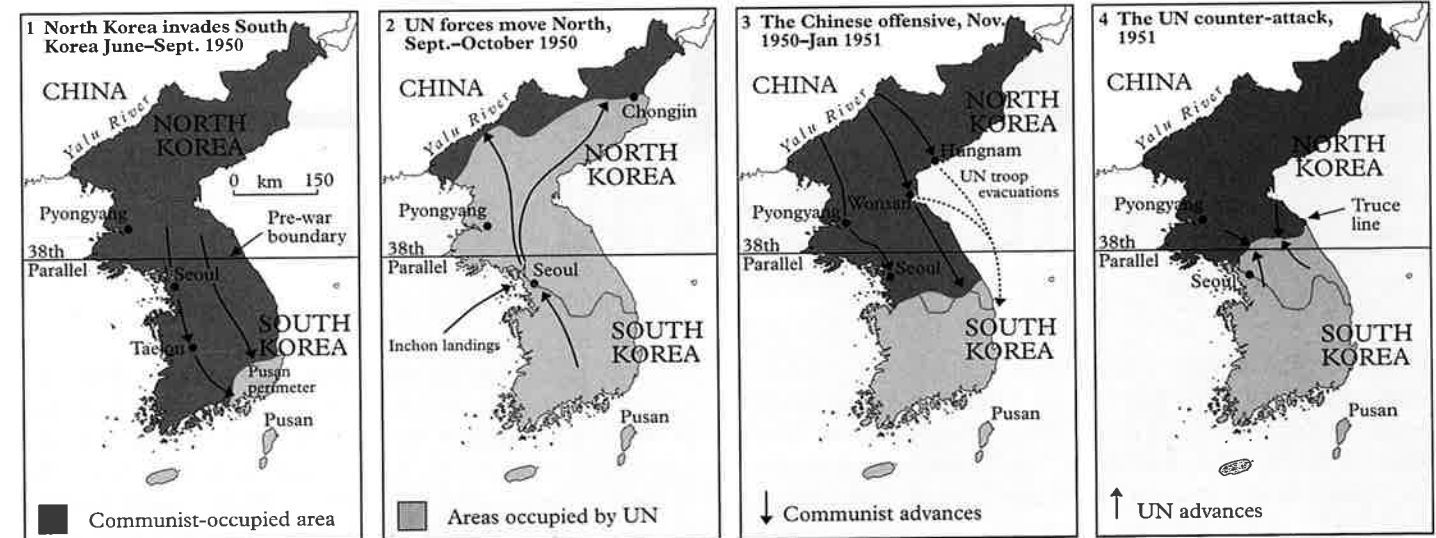
The American response

The United States immediately asked the United Nations to take action to stop the invasion. Under US pressure, the UN created a military force from the armies of 16 member states, and sent it to help the South Korean army fight the invaders. Though this was a United Nations army, it was dominated from the start by the United States. The USA was to provide 302,483 of its 341,828 troops, 86 per cent of its ships and 93 per cent of its aircraft.

Why did the USA send so many troops to Korea? Early reports of the invasion told them that the North Koreans were armed with Soviet tanks, aircraft, guns and ammunition. To the Americans, the invasion seemed a clear case of Soviet aggression.

It was not just Soviet aggression, though, that alarmed the Americans. Nine months earlier, communists had taken power in China, Korea's nearest neighbour. Communists were also fighting for power in Vietnam, Malaya and Indonesia. It appeared to the Americans that while communism had been contained in Europe, it was fast spreading from the Soviet Union into Asia.

A South Korean observation post on a mountain ridge between North and South Korea in 1950. North Korean territory is on the right of the ridge.



Four stages in the Korean War, 1950-53

Only ten years earlier, Asia was being conquered by another force – the Japanese empire. The United States had done little to stop it, and in 1941 was humiliated by Japan's attack on its base in Pearl Harbor. Looking at Korea in 1950, the Americans were determined that this mistake would not be repeated.

Events of the war

The North Korean invasion was very fast. Within two months the Communists had trapped the South Korean and UN forces in a small area around Pusan (see map 1). Their defeat seemed certain until UN sea-borne forces landed at Inchon and recaptured the capital, Seoul. Now the South Korean and UN troops at Pusan were able to counter-attack and to drive the Communists back to North Korea (map 2).

Despite a warning by China not to cross the 38th Parallel into North Korea, UN forces advanced to within 100 km of the Chinese border. As a result, the Chinese government sent 300,000 'volunteer' troops to support the North Korean army. They drove back the UN troops and advanced into South Korea (map 3).

UN forces halted the Communists in January 1951, and pushed them back across the 38th Parallel in March. General MacArthur, the UN Commander, wanted to continue north and attack China directly, using nuclear weapons against

Chinese cities. But Truman, the US President, feared that this would bring the Soviet Union into the war, and he sacked MacArthur.

The war now settled into a long stalemate. The two sides built trenches and fortifications on either side of the 38th Parallel so that neither could advance any further. Two years later, they signed an armistice at Panmunjom (July 1953). This left Korea divided at the 38th Parallel into two separate countries.

Results of the Korean War

For both North and South, the Korean War brought appalling destruction. Around four million people were killed. Millions more were homeless and starving. Huge areas of land lay wrecked and useless.

Did the Americans achieve their objective of containing communism? In one way, the answer was yes. Like the Iron Curtain in Europe, the 38th Parallel became an unpassable barrier. Behind it, South Korea not only remained independent and non-communist but also became one of the strongest economies in the region. By the 1990s it was one of the 'tiger economies' of Asia. But on the other side of the 38th Parallel, North Korea remained a communist country. By the mid-1990s it was the only country in the world still with a Soviet-style government and economy.

Questions

- Look at the photograph.
 - On what line of latitude was this border post?
 - Why was Korea divided by this line in 1945?
- Write captions for each of the maps, briefly explaining the events shown.
- Give three reasons why the Americans sent so many troops to Korea between 1950 and 1953.
- Did the Americans succeed in their aim? Explain your answer.